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Held at Headquarters, New York, on Wednesday, 29 October 2003, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Loedel ..... (Uruguay)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Agenda item 86: Questions relating to information *(continued)* (A/58/21, A/58/175, A/58/16 (chap. III, sect. B, programme 23) and A/58/90, annex)

1. **Mr. Ononye** (Nigeria) said that, within the context of the process of revitalizing the United Nations to comply with the provisions of the Millennium Declaration, the Department of Public Information should be provided with the funds it needed to enable it to cope with its increasing responsibilities. Despite the growing world demand for information and publicity about the activities of the United Nations, the digital divide between the industrialized world and the developing countries continued to widen, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. His delegation therefore wished to urge the developed world to coordinate better and increase its assistance to the developing countries, in order that they might benefit from the innovations in the area of information technology.

2. The quality of the services provided by the Department had improved markedly since its restructuring, particularly in the dissemination of information in support of the causes of self-determination, sustainable development, peacekeeping, the eradication of poverty and of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, tuberculosis and malaria. The determination of the Department to disseminate the ideals and goals of the New Partnership for Africa Development was praiseworthy, although it would also be desirable for it to use its publications Africa Recovery and Afrique Relevance to mobilize the international community's support for the New Partnership.

3. The United Nations should participate more in implementing Member States' information- technology policies and programmes by establishing closer and more effective ties with local authorities. Specifically, the Organization's information centres should be devoted more actively to the dissemination of information among the population by making effective use of radio. Hi Government welcomed the success achieved in the rationalization of the information centres in Western Europe and the creation of a regiona1 hub, although the establishment of regional hubs in Africa should be carried out prudently, owing to the special characteristics of that continent.

4. **Mr. Khomenko** (Ukraine) said that in the context of the reorientation of the Organization's public-information activities his delegation wished to commend the Department of Public Information for its efforts to update the United Nations website and make it more informative and functional. A successful example in that regard was the reconfiguration of the News Centre, an excellent source of information on the latest developments in the system and a gateway to a wide array of links to in-depth resources related to news of the day. The e-mail news service directly provided journalists, researchers and the general public, especially in countries in which the Internet was not yet widely available, with rapid access to the latest news about the United Nations and could be viewed as an important step towards bridging the digital divide. The live-radio project was one of the most noteworthy successes of the restructuring of the Department, since radio continued to be one of the most far-reaching and cost-effective traditional media of communication and a valuable instrument for the activities of the United Nations in the areas of development and peacekeeping.

5. His delegation supported the efforts of the Secretary-General and the Department to modernize and integrate the library services of the United Nations, since they would provide direct electronic access to the wealth of global information resources with a view to the exchange of knowledge. It welcomed the strengthening of the links between the Department and non-governmental organizations, which were playing a more and more important role in the decision-making process at the local and international levels, and it wished to commend the Department's activities in coordinating special events and programmes, in particular the celebration of World Press Freedom Day.

6. The Department was playing an important role in the Organization's peacekeeping and peace-building activities, which had become more far-reaching and complex during the past ten years and deserved full recognition by the international community. In that connection his delegation welcomed the work done by the Department to celebrate 29 May for the first time as the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers, with the aim of paying tribute to all

those who had served and continued to serve in United Nations peacekeeping operations and honouring the memory of all those who had, in the course of such operations, lost their lives in the cause of peace.

7. The development of his country was hampered by the long-standing consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. The human and ecological rehabilitation of the contaminated areas, which constituted 10 per cent of its territory, was consuming vast amounts of financial and material resources, and the damage suffered exceeded $US130 billion. Although the new United Nations strategy on Chernobyl had provided a constructive framework for reinvigorating international cooperation on Chernobyl, a number of its important programmes and projects still lacked funding, and his delegation therefore urged the Department to continue providing objective information on the scope of the consequences of that disaster.

8. Lastly, he reaffirmed his Government's conviction that freedom of the press was a cornerstone of democracy. Fifty-five years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it still had not come to be universally applied. Regrettably, more than 50 journalists had been killed during the current year, and the number of attacks against journalists was still growing. In that connection, the Committee's programme should include appropriate consideration of measures aimed at preventing attacks against journalists in areas of armed conflict.

9. **Mr. Ali** (Sudan) said that his delegation associated itself with the statement made by the representative of Morocco on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, and he stressed the importance of giving equal opportunity to the official languages of the United Nations in the area of public information, especially with regard to the situation of Arabic on the United Nations website, so as to promote the confidence inspired by the United Nations among the citizens of the world and to ensure the equitable distribution of its activities among all States.

10. It was of the greatest importance that the Organization's communications media should concentrate their attention on the fight against poverty and against illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, as well as on promoting rich countries' assistance to poor countries in the area of sustainable development and fostering the economy, with a view to reducing poverty, creating new jobs for young people and exploiting the resources of developing countries.

11. The Department of Public Information should play an active role in the dissemination of information aimed at channelling humanitarian assistance to victims of natural disasters. Attention should also be given to the victims of conflicts and wars which were devastating the underdeveloped areas of the world, in addition to encouraging donor countries and their organizations to provide assistance to a large segment of the world's population in the form of shelter, food and medicine.

12. Lastly, he commended the reorganization of United Nations information centres and their integration into regional hubs, a process which had to be carried out in consultation with the centres and countries concerned in order to ensure that those centres played complementary roles. It was also essential to integrate and modernize United Nations library services in order to emphasize the importance of their function in the gathering and presentation of data and information, and in that context, the highest priority should be given to opportunities for training in developing countries.

13. **Mr. Khalid** (Pakistan) said that 25 years after the General Assembly had called upon the Committee on Information to consider the question of establishing a new world information and communication order, that objective remained as elusive as before, and the same imbalances in the flow of information were continuing. The developing countries still lacked resources, professional workers and infrastructure facilities. They could not fully disseminate information about their societies, achievements and aspirations because they had to contend with the enormous resources and technological superiority of the developed world's communications media, which had begun to control the flow of information and to influence or distort opinion in other societies. To remove that disparity, it was imperative to determine its underlying causes so as to establish a balanced information system in which the communications media would provide full information about all societies and promote understanding among different cultures and religions. To that end, his delegation wished to request UNESCO to submit to the United Nations Committee on Information in the following year a report on its International Programme for the Development of Communications, a programme designed to strengthen the information infrastructure of developing countries.

14. The United Nations information centres were playing an important role in the dissemination of information about the activities of the system, ascertaining the reaction of the various countries concerning those activities and providing first-hand information on those advances made by the Organization that affected their welfare and development. Consequently the new concept of integrating those information centres into regional hubs in order to economize resources ran counter to the objective of providing information to citizens at their doorsteps, a goal for which it was of the utmost importance to maintain close interaction with the communications media of each country. It would be inappropriate to carry out that restructuring at a time such as the present, when questions were being raised concerning the relevance and prestige of the United Nations and when it was extraordinarily important to provide proper information on the operation, purpose and functioning of the Organization. For all of those reasons, he urged the Department of Public Information to consider the question more carefully and not to pursue its recommendations on such crucial matters without a clear mandate from the Fourth Committee.

15. **Mr. Dev Pant** (Nepal) associated his delegation with the statement made by the representative of Morocco on behalf of the Group of 77 and China and commended the Department of Public Information on the work it had done to improve its image and on the support it had given to peacekeeping and other political missions in enhancing their capacity to disseminate information on their activities. He also commended the Department's outreach programmes aimed at promoting collaboration with larger segments of society through the use of modern and traditional means of communication. In the less advanced countries, such as Nepal, traditional means of communication such as radio and the print media had a significant bearing on the lives of citizens. A shortage of resources and lack of technological know-how hindered the access of peoples to electronic media, and therefore the live-radio project with its worldwide reach was a laudable endeavour on the part of the Department to serve the common man.

16. His delegation welcomed the consultations to implement the proposal to regionalize United Nations information centres and wish to request the Department to ensure that the resources released as a result of such measures were transferred to activities in developing countries, giving priority to the least developed countries. United Nations information centres in the least developed countries required funds to carry out additional activities and to deliver results.

17. His delegation believed that the ongoing reforms were starting to show positive effects. In that context, it hoped that the project to prepare inventory of all the small and field libraries would be completed as planned and that the steps to draw up a master list of core areas of specialization available at United Nations libraries worldwide and to induct the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific as a full partner in the Shared Indexing Programme would be accomplished on time. It also believed that the depository libraries all over the world should be part of that process, so that they could contribute better to the Department's campaign for improving the United Nations information system.

18. Lastly, his delegation shared the concerns raised by many delegations about the growing digital divide, which had widened the gulf between rich and poor countries, lured away the skilled human resources of poor nations and negatively affected the development efforts of the South as a whole. The United Nations had a key role to play in rectifying that anomaly. The World Summit on the Information Society would be an important step forward in that direction.

19. **Ms. Mulamula** (United Republic of Tanzania) associated her delegation with the statement made by the representative of Morocco on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. She welcomed the report of the Committee on Information on the work of its twenty-fifth session and expressed her appreciation to the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information for his statement on the advances made in the restructuring and reorientation of the Department of Public Information and to the Secretary-General for his comprehensive report on questions relating to information.

20. Although much progress had been made in implementing the reform measures designed to improve the effectiveness of the broadcasting of public-information programmes, a great deal still remained to be done in order to ensure that the Department's new mission statement reached those to whom it was addressed, that is to say, the citizens of the world. Any communication strategy should have

systematic feedback machinery to confirm that the message had reached the citizens and also to assure the peoples of the world that the United Nations was listening to them. The Department should be receptive to new ideas in order that it might formulate effective communications strategies. The opinions of peoples were an important element in the formulation, evaluation and implementation of policies. Her Government viewed with approval the work of the Department on the formulation of a management strategy to make a systematic evaluation of the impact of its activities, so as to ensure that the information products and activities of the United Nations reached as wide a public as possible.

21. Her Government attached great importance to the work of the information centres, and particularly to the Dar es Salaam Information Centre, which had, notwithstanding the limited resources at its disposal, been the voice of the United Nations in the field for more than four decades. At that Centre materials and publications of the Department of Public Information had been translated into Kiswahili, the national language, for the benefit of the local population. Some of those materials had also been published on the Centre's website. The translation of United Nations documents was an activity that the Centre could carry out more frequently if it had more resources. Furthermore, the Centre also presided over the monthly meeting of the centres for coordinating United Nations information in her country. That group consisted of information officers and staff of all United Nations agencies and offices, who met every month to harmonize their activities and share their experiences. At present the group was preparing a joint publication in English and Kiswahili.

22. The United Nations should devote more resources to strengthening information activities in the field and in information centres. Those centres required financing and staff levels consistent with their constantly growing tasks and with the challenge posed by information technologies. Running a centre staffed on the basis of general temporary assistance was not the most suitable way to strengthen the Department's information capacity in developing countries. With a view to consolidating the nine information centres of Western Europe into one regional centre and to the consequent release of resources, her Government advocated an equitable distribution of the resources thus released, with special attention to the needs of developing countries and the least developed countries.

23. The development of human and technical resources was vital for improving the information and communication systems in developing countries. Her delegation welcomed the fact that the Department had given special attention to the annual training programme for journalists from developing countries, which was important for strengthening the outreach endeavour. However, much more could be done to increase the participation of a larger number of the least advanced countries, particularly African countries, in those programmes. Unfortunately, the Secretary-General's report contained no information regarding the continuation of that programme; her delegation hoped that the omission was due simply to an oversight.

24. Her delegation noted with satisfaction that the live-radio project had already been consolidated as one of the important traditional multimedia channels for strategically communicating the activities and concerns of the Organization to large audiences in every part of the world. It was particularly pleased to note that United Nations Radio continued to broadcast weekly programmes recorded in Kiswahili, despite the lack of adequate resources.

25. In most of the developing countries, radio continued to be the communications medium most accessible to the majority of the population, especially in rural areas. In Africa, 24 per cent of the population had access to radio, while only 7.8 per cent had television and only 0.6 per cent had access to the Internet. That difficult situation called for United Nations technical assistance in order to improve and develop the radio broadcasting services of the developing countries so that their peoples could have access to United Nations News. Her delegation hoped that the live-radio project would become a permanent element of the Department's activities and was pleased to note that the Department sought to obtain the same amount from the current regular budget for the biennium 2004-2005. She also urged Member States to provide all the support necessary for the approval of the Department's budget estimates.

26. The globalization process had widened the digital divide between developed and developing countries, although it could also be a positive force if the benefits it produced were equitably shared among all nations.

The World Summit on the Information Society would enable the international community to examine in depth the questions relating to the digital divide and outline the path that should be followed.

27. **Mr. Zongo** (Burkina Faso) associated his delegation with the statement made by the representative of Morocco on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. The United Nations was, above all, an organization of nations that loved peace, justice and tolerance, and one conceived for securing the well-being of the peoples of the world. Unfortunately, however, those peoples today had a greatly distorted perception of its work. The reverses suffered in recent years, at least with regard to the Organization's image as a mediator, particularly since the war in Iraq, had impaired its prestige. The factors that explained such narrowness of views included ignorance, illiteracy, the digital divide and the inadequacy of communication strategies. His delegation welcomed the fact that the new information and communication strategy would take account of those inadequacies, and it commended the efforts of the Department of Public Information aimed at ensuring that the widest possible public would become aware of, interested in and involved in the activities of the United Nations.

28. In order to support the efforts of the Department to that end, his Government conducted, at the end of each session of the General Assembly, symposia aimed at strengthening dialogue and collaboration between the national public administration and the staff of the United Nations system in Burkina Faso. Those symposia had a very favourable effect on the administration's staff, who benefited from the Organization's contribution to their departments, and on United Nations staff, who gained information on the progress of the Organization's operational activities for development. His Government appreciated the logistical support provided by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations information centre at Ouagadougou, whose support for the staff, students and organizations of civil society was irreplaceable.

29. Access to new information technologies continued to be difficult for the developing countries, and computers and the Internet were luxury items accessible only to a few wealthy persons. For that reason, his Government favoured the strengthening and optimum utilization of traditional communications media. In that context, it attached special importance to the work done by the Ouagadougou information centre through its support for the agencies in the region and the organizations of civil society.

30. His delegation supported the rationalization policy of the Department of Public Information aimed at making the information centres in the developing countries more operational, but it believed that the regionalization policy should be dealt with case by case, bearing in mind the function of each centre and the realities and needs of the various regions.

31. **Mr. Baatar** (Mongolia) said that his delegation subscribed fully to the statement made by the representative of Morocco on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. The restructuring of the information centres should be carried out with priority attention to the needs of the developing countries, in close consultation with the Member States concerned.

32. Many developing countries lacked the necessary infrastructure and resources, both in monetary terms and in human resources, to benefit from the rapid advance of information and communication technology. Until the ever-widening digital divide was addressed effectively, traditional information media such as radio continued to be the most widespread and cost-effective means in many developing countries. Mongolia welcomed the application of the live-radio project, since it believed that broadcasts in local languages would unquestionably make that endeavour more effective.

33. His delegation also hoped that every possible measure would be taken to close the digital divide between the developed and the developing countries. The United Nations, through its Department of Public Information, could play an important role in achieving that goal, so that developing countries might benefit from the global revolution in information technology. The World Summit on the Information Society would be an important milestone in the international community's efforts to bridge that divide.

34. The Department of Public Information could learn from the best practices of other international organizations. The International Committee of the Red Cross, for example, issued an annual review of its activities in the form of a 20-minute television documentary. A brief but multifaceted presentation of the activities and achievements of the United Nations in implementing the Millennium goals could increase the effectiveness and the impact of the Organization's

information products and services. In that regard, his delegation believed that in those countries in which no information centres existed, the information services of United Nations offices could play a pivotal role in disseminating information. He also stressed the need for a strict observance of multilingualism. However, in many developing countries the official languages of the United Nations were not spoken, and other new and imaginative strategies must be used to deliver the Organization's message to the general public, for example by using websites in local languages, in close cooperation with local communications media and civil society.

35. **Mr. Kanaan** (Organization of the Islamic Conference) said that the world was witnessing an astronomical leap in new information and communication technology, whose institutions were also growing constantly and whose benefits were spreading into all spheres of human learning. Modern communications media had assumed growing responsibility in the shaping of societal values, cultures, structures and future directions.

36. He commended the Department of Public Information for the important role it played and the efforts it was making in various fields; he believed that there were a number of questions that deserved the Department's support and attention. On the issue of human rights, the Secretary-General, in his report on the implementation of the Millennium Declaration (A/58/323), had warned that tolerance was too often the first casualty of a "war on terror", widely perceived, especially by Muslims, as a war against Islam. In that context, he wished to refer to the Secretary-General's note (A/58/318) entitled "Education and public information activities in the field of human rights", which highlighted the role of Member States and of regional and international organizations and institutions in supporting national initiatives and strategies for human-rights education for their implementation through partnerships among effective actors.

37. The question of dialogue among civilizations should be regarded as a continuous subject and a permanent issue constantly present on the international scene, not limited to one year only, and therefore the Department should continue supporting that issue in order that the achievements of the United Nations in that area might not be lost among a myriad of events.

38. The Department should continue its annual training programme for broadcasters and journalists from developing countries in order to enhance their professional capabilities and help them acquire in-depth knowledge of the work of the United Nations and its related organizations. In that connection, the Department deserved praise for renaming its annual training programme for young journalists in honour of Reham Al-Farra, one of the staff members who had died in the terrorist attack against the Baghdad headquarters of the United Nations in August.

39. Inasmuch as the Government of Israel continued its inhumane military campaign against the Palestinian people in the occupied Palestinian territories, it was imperative for the United Nations to exert more efforts in shouldering its responsibility relating to the question of Palestine, including responsibility in the field of information, until such time as a solution that was just in all its aspects was achieved. The Organization of the Islamic Conference commended the Department of Public Information for its special programme designed to enhance public awareness on the question of Palestine. The convening in New York in September 2002 and September 2003 of the International Conference on Civil Society in Support of the Palestinian People, under the theme "End the Occupation", deserved appreciation and commendation.

40. At the tenth session of its Summit, held at Putrajaya, Malaysia on 16 and 17 October 2003, the Islamic Conference had highlighted the significant role that should be played by the information and communication sector, particularly in the light of the exacerbation of the premeditated campaigns tarnishing the image of Islam and Muslims in some parts of the world; that role should be fulfilled by propagating the noble message of Islam founded on peace, tolerance, dialogue and interaction with other civilizations. The Conference had approved the proposal made by the President of Senegal for the establishment by the Conference of a solidarity fund for digital technologies in order to bridge the existing gap between developed and developing countries.

41. The Conference had also agreed to implement a plan of action that would include dialogue with other cultures and civilizations, including the West. The Troika of the Conference's Summit and the Friends of the Chair (Malaysia) would represent the Organization of the Islamic Conference in that dialogue. It had

further decided to establish programmes for collaboration between Member States in the deployment of information and communication technology for development based on the "smart partnership" principle in which Governments, communities and the private sector would be fully engaged.

42. The Conference had also requested Member States to enhance coordination for their participation in the World Summit on the Information Society in its two phases and called on them to draw up concepts and features for information in consonance with the principles and aspirations of Islamic societies to achieve progress, development and prosperity for all peoples.

43. **Mr. Requeijo** (Cuba), exercising the right of reply to what he described as the aggressive intervention of the representative of the United States of America, said that his delegation did not seek to politicize the subject of questions relating to information but instead wished to denounce the aggression to which Cuba was being subjected on the pretext of bringing information, or more precisely disinformation, to his country. The subjects mentioned by the representative of the United States, which should not have been taken up, were the factors politicizing the debate, and for that reason some clarifications were needed.

44. The representative of the United States not only had not answered the points raised by Cuba but had once again resorted to outmoded arguments to attack the social system that the Cuban people had built for itself without foreign intervention and in full exercise of self-determination, a fact that had troubled the Government of the United States for almost 45 years. Why did Cuba find itself obliged to denounce and interfere with the discredited and misnamed Radio Martí when it was not doing the same with the hundreds of broadcasters from other countries that could be heard in Cuba? Why was it not interfering with United Nations radio but was instead cooperating with that medium and rebroadcasting its programmes through various Cuban stations? Cuba's action reflected not a fear of the ideas being propagated but rather a righteous repudiation of falsehoods and slanders against the Cuban people.

45. The persons mentioned by the representative of the United States had been arrested or tried not for expressing their opinions but for working over a period of years for a hostile foreign Power, receiving precise instructions on how they should act and also receiving material and financial support from the Government of the United States and from extreme rightist Cuban-American groups to subvert the Cuban internal order and to damage the economic, political and social system that the people exercising its sovereignty and self-determination, had fully adopted. Those persons had been trying to re-establish the United States protectorate over the pseudo-Republic of Cuba before 1959, had committed serious violations of Cuban laws and had, by acting for a foreign Power, betrayed the most legitimate interests of his country. The persons implicated in such crimes had been tried before courts established with all guarantees in conformity with Cuba's Constitution and current legislation. Cuban courts were serious institutions and not the spectacles referred to by the representative of the United States, who could consult the penal code of the United States if he wished to see how severely such criminal activity was punished in his own country.

46. The representative of the United States had referred to a statement made on 7 April 2003 by the Director-General of UNESCO, which had been based on manipulated and deceptive information provided by some of his advisers. As Cuba had already pointed out at the meetings of the Committee on Information, where the United States delegation had used the same quotation, Mr. Matsuura had apologized on two occasions for that lamentable situation, and his apologies had been accepted with full courtesy by the Cuban authorities. Mr. Matsuura surely would not feel flattered to know of the attempt to use him for spurious purposes.

47. His delegation wished to express its surprise at the United States delegation's blatant rejection of Cuba's call for the establishment of a new international information order. If that delegation had paid due attention to what was proposed in the Committee by a substantial number of delegations, it would have been aware that that call had been repeated in the Committee chamber during the three days of debate. The Cuban delegation always spoke the truth, with total freedom to express it, and that was annoying to some people.

48. **Mr. Brown** (United States of America), exercising the right of reply, said that the representative of Cuba had exercised a right which was denied to Cuban citizens in his own country. The

response of the Cuban Government to 75 citizens who had dared to speak up for their human rights and fundamental freedoms had been to sentence them to more than 1,400 years of prison, and that was only the most recent example of how the Castro dictatorship had oppressed the Cuban people for almost 50 years.

49. **Mr. Requeijo** (Cuba), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, expressed regret that the representative of the United States had left the chamber, an action he regarded as showing lack of respect not only for the Cuban delegation but also for the work of the Committee. Using crude language of a kind not used in the Committee was also a sign of disrespect. It was possible to have differences of views or opinions, but good manners must be maintained, since otherwise there could be no dialogue, understanding or communication.

50. **Mr. Coelho** (Portugal), speaking on behalf of the Ad Hoc Open-Ended Working Group on Informatics, said that in recent years a technical subgroup of the Working Group had been addressing the question of connections between Member States and the United Nations Secretariat at Headquarters in order to enhance interaction on practical questions relating to the use of information technology in the work of the United Nations. In that spirit, the Working Group had played a useful role in the continuous improvement of information technology services and training that were provided to delegations at Headquarters and included the provision and maintenance of personal computers in the conference areas for use by delegations, broader availability of official documents through the Internet, website hosting services provided by the Secretariat to Member States, increased access for Member States to specialized databases of interest to them, and the development of training programmes provided by the Secretariat and others for Member States in the use of various information- technology services.

51. He wished to present a practical tool that representatives could use in their everyday work. It was Internet Services for Delegates, a booklet intended as a guide to the information-technology services already available, which also provided useful advice that could help representatives take full advantage of the Internet-based tools, services and resources provided by the Secretariat.

52. Another project being prepared by the Working Group was a software programme that would enable representatives, if they wished, to download onto their Personal Digital Assistants such practical data as the Daily Journal and other topical information relating to their work at the United Nations and was being prepared at the initiative of the delegation of Andorra.

53. **Mr. Tharoor** (Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information) said that the debate had raised a number of issues that he would like to clear up in his final comments. Making the Department of Public Information the public voice of the Organization required, as the Chairman of the Committee on Information had said, not only a good plan and leadership but also the political and material support of Member States.

54. The representatives of Tunisia and Egypt had stressed the importance of the relationship between the Department and the Committee on Information, and the Department would continue to be guided by the recommendations and norms of that Committee. The relations of the Department with the Committee on Information were excellent, but the Department would not rest on it laurels. With regard to the suggestion that the Bureau of that Committee should be informed about the work of the Department between sessions, he was looking forward with interest to discussing with the Bureau how that could be achieved. The Chairman of the Committee on Information had maintained periodic contacts with the Department, continuing the practice established by his predecessor.

55. To illustrate the relationship between the Committee on Information and the Department, he said that the Chairman of that Committee had accepted the Department's invitation to participate in the World Electronic Media Forum, a meeting which paralleled the World Summit on the Information Society and had been organized by the Department in association with the television industry and the Government of Switzerland. In the Forum the representatives of communications media would discuss questions relating to freedom of the press and responsibility in the electronic age, the independence of communications media, the importance of pluralism in information sources and the question of imbalance in the flow of information, an issue raised by the representative of Pakistan.

56. He expressed satisfaction that the representative of Tunisia, one of the host countries of the Summit, and the representative of Algeria had said that the

World Summit on the Information Society provided an opportunity to prepare practical means for closing the digital divide, as the delegation of Burkina Faso had also said.

57. A number of delegations had spoken of the urgent need to ensure that the new information and communication technologies would be used for the benefit of development, and he was in full agreement on that issue. The representative of Italy, speaking on behalf of the European Union, and the representative of the United States of America had emphasized the importance of freedom of expression; some Member States had expressed concern that the World Summit, instead of reaffirming the importance of freedom of the press, might attempt to limit that fundamental right. The Department of Public Information had been working at various levels to reaffirm the need for establishing at the Summit international standards relating to freedom of expression, and that essentially implied reaffirming article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That principle had also been reaffirmed in various regional declarations; the best known was the Windhoek Declaration of 3 May 1991, which the General Assembly had endorsed by proclaiming 3 May World Press Freedom Day.

58. In his statements made at Telecom World 2003 at Geneva, in the Second Committee on 23 October 2003, on newspaper opinion pages and in interviews, he had endeavoured to stress the importance of having the Summit support freedom of the press, opinion and expression, since those, as the General Assembly had affirmed, were fundamental freedoms.

59. The free exchange of information was becoming more and more important in development assistance and the relief of poverty, and any attempt to limit those freedoms would force away the communications media, which were fundamental participants in the efforts to take maximum advantage of the benefits associated with the use of information and communication technologies and to reduce the problems arising from such use.

60. He shared the distress expressed by a number of delegations at incidents of violence against journalists; the death of Jean Hélène, a correspondent of Radio France International, at Abidjan the preceding week was yet another tragic example of violence against those who were working to keep the world informed. A more positive event had been the release of the four journalists kidnapped the preceding Sunday in Guatemala together with three other persons.

61. The representatives who had stressed the importance of information and communication technologies for the benefit of development would be pleased to know that the Department of Public Information, in cooperation with the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, had helped to transform the World Summit on the Information Society from an event concentrating on new information technologies to a much broader summit whose main components would include questions relating to development and communications media. As the draft final document, the draft declaration of principles and the draft plan of action clearly showed, development was one of the central questions to be considered at the Summit.

62. Responding to a concern voiced by the Group of 77 and China, he expressed satisfaction at the important role being given to the Department of Public Information in the promotion of sustainable development, and he stated that the Department was collaborating closely with the secretariat of the Commission on Sustainable Development in formulating a communications strategy for the next two years that would concentrate on water, sanitation and human settlements. Furthermore, in response to another concern expressed in that same statement, he affirmed that 24 per cent of the users of the United Nations website were Internet users from developing countries, although there were probably many more who gained access through providers in other countries or servers which did not use any country designation.

63. The search for peace in the Middle East was one of the highest priorities of the United Nations, and therefore of the Department. Among other examples, he mentioned the creation of a coordinating centre for communications media in Arabic, a seminar for international information media on peace in the Middle East held at Seville, Spain, the annual training programme that the Department provided for Palestinian professionals in the communications media, and the five weeks of practical training in audiovisual production and information which had been provided for ten Palestinian journalists.

64. Responding to the Mongolian proposal on the possibility of producing an annual documentary on the work of the United Nations, he said that the

Department was already producing such a documentary and was distributing it to television broadcasters all over the world.

65. He welcomed with particular pleasure the fact that delegations had expressed satisfaction at the enormous efforts made by the Department to promote multilingualism. The six official languages were being used in the information provided by the News Centre, the website of the Department's programme entitled The UN Works and, in large measure, on the website of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, as well as in the UN Chronicle and on the United Nations television channel and United Nations Radio, which also broadcast in Portuguese and Kiswahili. Similarly, the Department provided guided tours in 20 languages, and the information centres were producing documentation printed in 28 languages, radio programmes in seven, and television broadcasts in 14, besides maintaining websites in 31 different languages.

66. The Department wished to provide more information in the six official languages but was prevented from doing so by to lack of resources. Although Member States took for granted the allocation of resources for the translation of meeting documents into the six official languages, that was not the case for United Nations publications. There would come a time when that situation could no longer be maintained; nevertheless, the search for innovative solutions to achieve greater linguistic parity would continue.

67. With regard to the needs of Africa, he said that the Department was carrying out a worldwide multimedia programme with a view to strengthening support for the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and was working with the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa and the NEPAD secretariat in forming a global and integrated strategy designed to promote support for NEPAD at all levels. As examples of the Department's efforts to promote an understanding of the subjects that were of concern to NEPAD, he mentioned the publication Africa Recovery and its website; United Nations Radio, which devoted 80 per cent of its broadcasts to the African continent; and the News Centre, which devoted a great part of its information to that subject.

68. In the process of regionalization of the information centres, the Department would consult the Member States concerned and take advantage of the experience acquired during the creation of the Brussels regional centre, but always bearing in mind the special circumstances of developing countries and those of each specific region. Similarly, attention would be given to the opinions expressed by Member States during the current session. The assets released as a result of the closing of the nine Western European information centres would be used to strengthen the information centres of the cities hosting the regional centres. In order to put an end to the concentration of managing staff in the developed countries, three posts in the D-1 category would be transferred from Western Europe to key centres in the regions of the developing countries in which there were no staff members in that category. The basic purpose of that new focus was not to save resources but to seek greater effectiveness that would enable the information centres to have the desired impact. He shared the concern of the United Republic of Tanzania about the shortage of resources allocated to the information centres, but in the light of the prevailing budgetary climate, he had little hope that the amount would be increased.

69. In connection with the proposal to give the Dag Hammarskjöld Library a leading role in the recently created Steering Committee for the Modernization and Integrated Management of United Nations Libraries, he said that the Library was already participating in the seven subcommittees and was chairing three of them. The Library and the Department intended to improve library services inter alia by the creation of shared access through the Internet and improved delivery of documents. In that regard, he ensured the representative of Switzerland that the Department had no intention to reduce the role of the Geneva Library; what was needed was simply to put the benefits of the individual libraries at the service of everyone.

70. He took note of the comment of the representative of the United States concerning the UN Chronicle (A/C.4/58/SR.15) but recalled that that publication, which during the past two years had been modernized and also had an Internet edition and a number of electronic services, was intended not for delegates but for secondary schools and universities. Nevertheless, the impact of that publication, as well as that of the Department's other products, would be thoroughly reassessed.

71. **Mr. Ballestero** (Costa Rica) expressed concern about the internal operation of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, particularly the well-known difficulty of

finding documents. In an organization as large as the United Nations, it was basic to centralize documents and have a clear idea of who issued them and where they could be found. For that reason, his delegation appealed to the Department of Public Information to improve the system of document filing and wished to know what steps were being taken to facilitate delegate access to United Nations documents.

72. **Mr. Assaf** (Lebanon) inquired whether United Nations television broadcasts could be seen in New York outside of Manhattan. Time Warner Cable asserted that they could not. If that was a fact, he wished to know what steps the Department of Public Information had taken in the matter.

73. **Mr. Tharoor** (Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information) expressed regret at the dissatisfaction of the representative of Costa Rica with the way in which the Dag Hammarskjöld Library was being utilized and said that he would request the Chief Librarian to meet with him and serve as an expert who could resolve his doubts and problems, which were no doubt shared by other delegations. Replying to the representative of Lebanon, he said that the United Nations television channel could be seen in only some areas of Manhattan, since it was a service provided gratis by Time Warner Cable to the United Nations and was limited to providing live daily programmes and, occasionally, United Nations material for its broadcasts. Unfortunately, expanding the service would require resources which the United Nations did not have available. Nevertheless, the Department was providing copious material free of charge to a great variety of national and international television broadcasters. In that connection he encouraged Governments that could do so to promote an increase in the percentage of United Nations material broadcast by their countries' television systems and to contact the Division of News and Information Media, which would be glad to provide, either free of charge or at cost, audiovisual material for more extensive broadcasting.

Adoption of measures on draft resolution A, "Information at the service of humanity"; draft resolution B, "Public information policies and activities of the United Nations"; and the draft decision entitled "Increasing the number of members of the Committee on Information" (A/58/21, chap. V)

74. The Chairman said that if there was no objection, he would take it that the Committee wished to approve the draft resolutions and the draft decision by consensus and without submitting them to a vote.

75. *It was so decided.*

Report of the Committee on Programme and Coordination (A/58/16)

76. **The Chairman** said that if there was no objection he would take it that the Committee adopted the conclusions and recommendations appearing in the section on programme 23, "Public Information", of chapter III.B of the report.

77. *It was so decided.*

78. **The Chairman** announced that the Committee had completed its consideration of agenda item 86.

The meeting rose at 5.05 p.m.

United Nations A/C.4/58/SR.17

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Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

Summary record of the 17th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 30 October 2003, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Loedel ..... (Uruguay)

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03-58790 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

Agenda item 83: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
(A/58/13, A/58/13/Add.1, A/58/13/Corr.1, A/58/119, A/58/205, A/58/206, A/58/256, A/58/339 and A/58/450)

1. **Mr. Hansen** (Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)), presenting the UNRWA report for the period 1 July 2002 - 30 June 2003 (A/58/13), stated that since September 2000, the Agency had been facing serious difficulties in alleviating the effects of the intifada on Palestine refugees in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, while continuing to provide its services for Palestine refugees established in its three other zones of operation: the Syrian Arab Republic, Lebanon and Jordan.

2. UNRWA provided educational, health and social services, and ran a microfinancing and microenterprise programme. Education was its largest programme: it was administering 651 schools providing basic education to 490,000 students. Although classrooms were overcrowded as a result of continuous demographic pressure, the Agency prided itself on the quality of the programme, although chronic lack of funding had led to a deterioration of results. The health programme, which focused on primary health care and required an adequate and sustainable level of investment, had made management reforms in the areas of information, hospital management and medicine supply. The Agency also aimed to serve the needs of the most vulnerable refugee groups through social and relief services. The Special Hardship Programme was facing growing demand because of the difficult situation existing in Jordan, restrictions on the employment of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and the crisis in the Occupied Palestine Territories. The financial situation of the General Fund meant that the reconstruction of housing was wholly reliant on extrabudgetary contributions. The microfinancing and microenterprise programme had grown enormously and had extended its activities to Jordan and Syria, although in the occupied territory it had been hindered by the steady worsening of the economic situation.

3. The economic situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories had continued to deteriorate during the reporting period: gross national income had fallen by 38 per cent since 1999; over 30 per cent of the active population were unemployed; some 200,000 jobs had been lost in Israel and in the occupied Palestine territory; and about 60 per cent of the Palestinian population was living below the poverty line. Food continued to be distributed to roughly 127,000 families in Gaza and 90,000 on the West Bank, although in smaller quantities because the Agency had only obtained half of the emergency funding requested. The International Committee of the Red Cross had been forced to discontinue its food aid programme for lack of resources, which could only increase the burden carried by the Agency in terms of food assistance. Emergency employment had been provided to 41,000 Palestinian refugees, and short-term employment for 250,000 people, nonetheless, many of those jobs had had to be discontinued for lack of funding. There had been a substantial increase in the demolition of refugee housing on the Gaza Strip throughout the past year, and, although major projects were underway, the Agency could not build houses to match the rate at which they were being destroyed.

4. For years, the Agency's precarious financial situation had been preventing it from dealing with the increases numbers of refugees to whom it was committed, for which reason it had made a number of reforms that had significantly enhanced its effectiveness. On the other hand, the various austerity measures that had been forced upon it over the years had undermined the investments made. The new Staff Rules of 1999 entailed a drop in wages and serious problems in attracting and retaining suitably qualified staff. With regard to the General Fund, UNRWA had been dealing systematically with a lack of operating capital and a precarious cash flow situation that had put the payroll at risk. This year, for the first time, the Agency was not facing a cash shortfall, thanks to a slight increase in income arising from the appreciation of the euro against the dollar and substantial value-added-tax reimbursements made by the Palestinian Authority. In addition, major assistance had come from cash contributions from the European Commission, which had established an annual increase of 5 per cent in its multiyear contribution commitment, and also from various countries that had increased their

contributions to the General Fund. That slight improvement in the general financial situation of UNRWA needed to be channelled into a strategy for restoring the quality of its services. The emergency appeal had revealed signs of donor fatigue, and the response was diminishing despite increased needs, leading to cutbacks in food distributions and other necessary activities. Refugees were increasingly reliant on UNRWA, given the retrenchment of other international agencies and the decrease in funds collected by local charity organizations.

5. The Agency maintained good working relations with Syria, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. In Lebanon, the Agency was grateful for a more constructive government attitude towards its work and the treatment of Palestinian refugees. The main problem, however, was the fulfilment of its mandate in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Military operations, internal and external closures, and the denial of visas and permits had continued to seriously disrupt the Agency's work. The Israeli defence forces continued to ignore all the Agency's privileges and immunities, and their incursions had caused destruction of its equipment in schools and training and health centres. Following a suicide attack perpetrated in Tel Aviv in May 2003, the Israeli authorities had imposed tight restrictions on the movement of UNRWA international personnel in the Gaza Strip. During the reporting period, six of the Agency's personnel had died, one of them at the hands of an Israeli sniper whilst inside a clearly marked UNRWA area. It was worth recalling that personnel working in the Agency's zone were the only United Nations staff on the ground that were not receiving hazard pay. In all likelihood, the separation barrier being built on the West Bank would represent a major additional obstacle to the Agency's work.

6. UNRWA was reviewing its current situation and considering its medium-term challenges, with a view to designing a strategy for the coming years to maintain its infrastructure and services at appropriate levels. In support of that process, it had accepted an invitation from the Government of Switzerland to host a special conference of the Agency's main donors and host countries in June 2004. Intensive preparations were ongoing with a view to reviving support for UNRWA among the international community and to establish a forum to debate the problems facing the Agency in the years to come.

7. **Mr. Frydenlund** (Norway), Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, presented the report of the Working Group (A/S8/4S0), which had been observing with concern the Agency's difficulties over last year, particularly its dire financial situation. It was international community's responsibility to ensure that UNRWA services were maintained at an acceptable level, in both quantity and quality, with funding that matched the natural growth of the refugee population. The Working Group recommended that the Agency improve the management of special projects, including preparation of proposals, draft budget and viability evaluation.

8. The Working Group recognized that UNRWA had made substantial progress in reducing the effects of the structural deficit of previous years. It lauded the Commissioner-General and all UNRWA personnel for their unstinting efforts to maintain the Agency's basic services despite resource constraints. It also praised the Commissioner-General for his efforts to obtain funds, keep the main donors and authorities of host countries informed and interested, seek new sources of support and financing, and attempt to widen the donor base.

9. The Working Group was alarmed by the adverse effects of the austerity measures on the Agency's humanitarian activities; it noted with concern that expenditure per refugee had fallen from an average of US$200 per year in the 1970s to under US$70 in the most recent decade.

10. The refugee problem was closely related to a political problem that had arisen over half a century ago, which it was essential to resolve once and for all in accordance with United Nations resolutions. Nonetheless, the current problems of refugees were humanitarian, and responsibility for addressing them needed to be shared by the international community. UNRWA services had to be seen as the minimum necessary for refugees to live productive lives. Any further cutback in services would not only unfairly deprive them of the minimum support to which they were entitled, but could also destabilize the entire region.

11. In order to provide UNRWA with a solid financial base, the Working Group urged all governments to contribute to its budget, to increase its amount and make timely payments; and it called on Governments to review the issue of special contributions to accumulate working capital so that UNRWA services

could be maintained without interruption and services that had been suspended as a result of austerity measures could be re-established, and to ensure that donor support for emergency or special programmes did not involve a reduction or diversion of contributions to the Agency's ordinary programme.

12. **Ms. Nasser** (Palestinian Observer) thanked the Commissioner-General for his report, and expressed to him and his staff her recognition of the efforts that were being made in a highly complex socioeconomic and political situation.

13. Palestinian refugees had been waiting for a fair solution to their tragic predicament for over half a century. Millions of people were still living in 59 refugee camps, which had only ever been intended as a temporary solution, in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Palestinian refugees, like other refugees in the world and throughout history, were entitled to return to their homes. In 1948, paragraph 11 of General Assembly resolution 194 (III) had stressed the right of the Palestinian people to return to their homes, since then that right had been reaffirmed year after year. Palestinian refugees had pinned their hopes of being able to exercise their rights on the steadfastness of the international community; but Israel continued to refuse to take responsibility for their situation and categorically rejected their right to return to their homes, which had merely aggravated the problem.

14. The speaker also highlighted the importance of individual rights to private property, including land ownership. Israel had to recognize that Palestinian refugees, as recorded in the files of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine, were owners of 5.5 million dunums of land. The cornerstone of any fair and definitive solution to the Palestinian refugee problem required that land to be returned to its owners, or a fair compensation paid where acceptable. In that regard, modernization of the Commission's files and the UNRWA project for the registration of Palestinian refugees could help to simplify the procedures involved in such an important process. In addressing the situation of Palestinians uprooted from their land it was also important to reaffirm the right of Palestinians displaced in 1967 to return to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as first proclaimed by the Security Council in resolution 237 (1967), which should have been updated years ago in accordance with agreements reached between the parties.

15. The Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine to the United Nations reaffirmed its willingness to consolidate and rationalize the resolutions that were traditionally approved on that agenda item, without belittling their fundamental considerations, whether legal, political or humanitarian; without detaching the question of UNRWA assistance from the context in which it was operating and the situation and rights of the refugees it had to serve; and addressing the main issues clearly and logically to preserve their integrity.

16. For over 53 years, the Agency had played a valuable and indispensable role. The desperate predicament in which the Palestinian refugees were living would surely have reached catastrophic proportions if it were not for the establishment of the Agency, the assistance it provided and the tireless dedication of its staff. Given the continuous deterioration of the political, economic, social and security situation in the region, UNRWA services were necessary for the survival of many refugees.

17. The socioeconomic conditions of the Palestinian refugees remained difficult in all areas of operation, and the number of people living in situations of special hardship had increased. Conditions in refugee camps in Lebanon also remained very difficult. Furthermore, Palestinian refugees in Iraq were being affected by the crisis in that country. Those refugees satisfied the criteria specified in the UNRWA mandate, and should therefore be its responsibility. Nonetheless, the Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine was grateful for the work done to alleviate their situation by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other organizations. The harsh conditions in the refugee camps in the Occupied Palestinian Territories were made worse by continuous Israeli military aggression. Constant Israeli violations of international law, including international humanitarian law, had seriously aggravated the situation of the Palestinian refugees, who represented nearly half of the civilian population. Thousands of refugees had had their property expropriated, had been displaced from their places of origin, and had had their belongings destroyed among the ruins of their bulldozed homes, or bundled up in desperation as they fled the attacks of the occupying forces. Once again, they had seen their lives uprooted, their security threatened, and their human dignity violated.

18. The refugee camps in the occupied Gaza Strip continued to be subjected to large-scale Israeli

incursions and military attacks, which caused major damage and destroyed housing and infrastructure. While the residents of the Yenin refugee camp were attempting to recover from the Israeli attack of April 2002, supported by a subsidy from the United Arab Emirates Red Crescent Society, the occupying forces had wreaked further damage and destruction in the camps of Rafah, Khan Younis and Bureij, among others. Israeli incursions in Rafah, which had destroyed nearly 200 homes, damaged dozens of other houses and properties, and had made over 2,000 Palestinian people homeless, had been the most recent act of widespread destruction, and constituted a serious violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The Agency had responded immediately to those crises, establishing temporary shelter for homeless refugees in the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank, and providing them with other forms of emergency assistance; but it had faced serious difficulties in coping with the pace of destruction caused by the occupying forces, and had been forced to draw on extrabudgetary funds.

19. Since 28 September 2000, the Israeli occupying forces had deliberately killed over 2,600 Palestinians, including children, men and women, and had wounded a further 40,000. Many of those killed and disabled as a result of the attacks were UNRWA-registered refugees. The Agency's health services had been seriously impaired by the attacks. There were also refugees among the over 6,000 Palestinians still being detained or held in Israeli prisons.

20. Israeli restrictions on the movement of people and merchandise, including humanitarian material, throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territories, continued to seriously impair socioeconomic conditions among the Palestinian refugees, one of the most vulnerable population groups. Those restrictions had obstructed and often completely prevented access to places of work, schools, food and drinking water, and also to health services, resulting in a high rate of unemployment, thousands of school days lost, and high levels of malnutrition and anaemia, among other illnesses. In addition, Israel's construction of a wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem, threatened to raise yet a another obstacle to the provision of services to refugees living in the area, as had been shown in Qalqilya.

21. The Israeli occupying forces had continued to obstruct the work of the Agency and other humanitarian organizations providing support to the Palestinian people, in flagrant violation of international law. In May 2003, United Nations agencies and various nongovernmental organizations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories had issued a public communiqué protesting against the severe restrictions imposed by Israel on their movements and at the disturbances caused to their programmes, including the distribution of emergency humanitarian aid.

22. The restrictions often prevented and delayed the distribution of humanitarian supplies such as food, medicines, blood and other necessary items. The Agency's vehicles were subject to inspection and suffered lengthy delays at Israeli checkpoints; and ambulances were prevented from transporting patients needing urgent attention. The Agency's vehicles had also come under fire from the occupying forces.

23. The Agency's doctors, nurses and teachers were often prevented from reaching their work places or returning to their homes. In addition, its staff had been harassed and humiliated, both physically and verbally, at Israeli checkpoints; and several had been beaten, wounded and detained. Israel had detained at least 64 staff members and had systematically denied the Agency access to them.

24. The occupying forces had even killed six of the Agency's staff, including Mr. Ian Hook, director of UNRWA projects in Yenin, who had been shot by an Israeli sniper while he was evacuating staff from a clearly identified United Nations complex in prevention of an Israeli military operation. The Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine condemned those assassinations and the continuing massacres of Palestinian civilians; the perpetrators should be held accountable for their crimes.

25. The Agency's facilities and equipment had also not been immune from attacks that had damaged several of their buildings, including a number of schools and training and health centres. The occupying forces had also commandeered schools and used them as bases and detention centres. The Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine insisted that UNRWA and other United Nations agencies should be allowed to fulfil their mandates free from harassment, intimidation, obstruction and destruction. The occupying power should comply with the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention, in addition to its obligations arising from the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, the

Charter of the United Nations, and its own agreement with the Agency. All restrictions on the movement of goods and Agency staff should be lifted, and compensation paid for the damage that had been caused to its facilities and equipment.

26. The situation had also imposed an additional burden on the Agency's limited resources, forcing it to focus on urgent priorities to the detriment of other projects and programmes, including a number of reforms. Over 75 per cent of the Agency's schools continued to work on a double shift, and the Agency was striving to maintain the pace of application of the study plan improvements introduced by the educational authorities in the host country. The deteriorating health situation continued to stretch the health services, while social and relief services, focusing mainly on providing assistance to women, children and the disabled, had seen an increase in the number of people in situations of special hardship.

27. The situation had once again forced the Agency to make emergency appeals to raise funds for its emergency programmes. Without the additional contributions provided by donors, the Agency would have been unable to provide the assistance the refugees needed. The problems caused to the Agency by the Israeli actions should be a cause for concern to the donor community because, in addition to their humanitarian consequences, they have put the Agency under greater financial pressure. That serious problem should be given the attention it deserved. Apart from all its financial problems, the Agency had also faced attacks, pressure, and blackmail from friends of Israel in certain places. This unacceptable and pernicious situation, which was undermining the Agency's work, needed to be brought to an end.

28. The Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine was grateful to the donor community for their generous response to the emergency appeals. It also thanked donor countries for their contributions to the ordinary UNRWA budget and urged them to increase their funding to enable the Agency to maintain the necessary levels of services in all zones. The Agency's budget covered minimum expenses in relation to the refugees' needs. Moreover, refugees were helping to defray expenses of services through shared payment systems, self-help plans and participation quotas, whenever this was convenient and viable. It was essential to calm the fears of the refugees, who viewed the financial difficulties being faced by the Agency as signs of abandonment by the international community. While waiting for a fair and lasting solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, financial support from the international community was as essential as its political support.

29. The Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine thanked host countries for the attention they had given to the Palestinian refugees for over 55 years, and it urged Jordan, Lebanon and Syria to continue working with UNRWA to facilitate its task. The Mission was also grateful for the enhanced cooperation between UNRWA and other United Nations agencies, and collaboration with humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society.

30. **Mr. Hassan** (Jordan) thanked the UNRWA Commissioner-General for the Agency's annual report (A/5S/13). The Palestinian refugee problem was of the utmost importance to Jordan, for which reason it insisted on the need to reach an agreed solution to the refugee problem in conformity with General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and the Arab peace initiative, in order to guarantee Palestinian refugees their right to return, pay them compensation and safeguard the rights of all host countries.

31. Pursuant to the declaration of unity between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the West Bank in 1950, most Palestinian refugees and displaced people living in Jordan were Jordanian nationals, notwithstanding their rights in Palestine, whether legal or historical, which Jordanian nationality in no way annulled.

32. Jordan was home to over 1.7 million UNRWA-registered Palestinian refugees, who represented 42.1 per cent of all Palestinian refugees and 90 per cent of all of those displaced in 1967. The Government of Jordan was spending over US$400 million every year to provide them with education, health, infrastructure, social welfare and security services and to improve their conditions of life in 13 camps throughout the country. In 2003, UNRWA had allocated US$72.7 million of its budget to operations in Jordan, while between July 2002 and June 2003 the Government of Jordan had spent US$423.1 million on services for refugees. Accordingly, Jordan appealed to all donor countries to continue contributing to the UNRWA budget, while thanking them for the support provided over a 10-year period; it also thanked the Government

of the United States for its recent donation of US$595,000 to build a new school for Palestinian refugees in Jordan.

33. Israeli practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories were obstructing the work of UNRWA personnel. The Commissioner-General's report stated that UNRWA had lost over US$20 million as a result of Israel's continuous closures of Palestinian areas and the imposition of restrictions on free movement within them. Moreover, in contravention of international law and international humanitarian law, Israel was continuing to build the separation barrier in the Palestinian territories, which involved forceful expropriation and annexation of Palestinian land, isolation from Palestinian towns and their installations, and the indirect clearance of towns by creating conditions rendering them uninhabitable, as had happened in Qalqilya. All the hostile measures taken by Israel had merely caused more suffering, despair and frustration to the Palestinian people, undermining trust between the parties, which was currently nonexistent, and fostering radical and extremist movements.

34. With regard to the resolutions concerning UNRWA that the Committee had before it, Jordan wished once again to reaffirm its support to its Palestinian brothers, so that those resolutions would benefit the cause of the Palestinian refugees; and it reiterated its permanent willingness to work with all stakeholders to achieve that objective.

35. **Mr. Assaf** (Lebanon) offered his condolences to the families of UNRWA staff who had lost their lives in the performance of their duties; and he expressed his support to the Commissioner-General in the current difficult circumstances, in which he had been threatened by tanks.

36. The Palestinian refugee problem was not simply a matter of food and housing; for, as Jesus had said, man does not live by bread alone. The refugees also needed freedom, dignity, and especially their land. Numerous resolutions had called for the return of the Palestinian refugees, starting with General Assembly resolution 194 (III), in paragraph 11; Security Council resolution 237 (1967) in paragraph 1; not to mention the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, and General Assembly resolution 273 (III) relating to the admission of Israel as a member of the United Nations, in which the Assembly had also asked Israel to allow the Palestinian refugees to return.

37. The minutes of the session of the Special Political Committee held in 1949 clearly stated that before Israel's admission as a member of the United Nations, the representative of Lebanon had asked the representative of Israel whether the statements made by the Israeli Government and its representatives implied rejection of paragraph 11 of General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The latter had replied that his Government did not reject that paragraph or any other part of resolution 194 (III). Nonetheless, since Israel had become a member of the United Nations, it had not fulfilled the provisions of the resolution, and today voted against the return of the Palestinians. In essence, therefore, the issue was a legal and political one relating to occupation and international peace and security, which had been assigned to the Special Political Committee because it involved a political matter. If it had been a social issue it would have been assigned to the Third Committee.

38. In addition to attempting to displace Palestinian refugees from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Israel had started to persecute and assassinate the staff of the Agency created to assist the refugees, as indicated in paragraph 7 of the UNRWA report; destroying its installations and making armed incursions into its offices, as clearly described in paragraph 171 of the report; and seizing the Agency's funds by levying import duties on goods entering the Palestinian territories through Israeli ports. Napoleon had said "Open schools and the prisons will close", but Israel was closing UNRWA schools and turning them into prisons.

39. The Palestinian refugee question was a top priority for Lebanon, whose position was based on three pillars: firstly, the Palestinians themselves refused to remain in Lebanon and wanted to return to their homeland; secondly, the refusal of Palestinian refugees to settle in Lebanon had been registered in the Constitution of Lebanon, and was now one of its articles; and thirdly, the number of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon exceeded its absorption capacity and was causing a demographic imbalance in the country.

40. Paragraph 38 of the UNRWA report stated that the total sum it allocated to Lebanon was US$50.1 million. As Lebanon had 391,000 Palestinian refugees, expenditure per capita therefore amounted to five cents

per day, and the speaker was grateful to donor countries that were helping to rectify that situation. UNRWA remained a temporary solution for the Palestinian refugee problem; the only permanent solution was to allow them to return to their homeland, for which purpose Agency should continue registering them so that they could maintain their political identity as refugees and their national identity as Palestinians, and be ready for the moment when they could return.

41. **Mr. Rahman** (Bangladesh expressed deep concern at the worsening situation in the Middle East. According to the UNRWA report, over 10,000 Palestinians had been made homeless as a result of housing demolitions since September 2000. The restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities had seriously curtailed Palestinians' freedom of movement and had aggravated their already difficult humanitarian situation. The obstructionist measures detailed in the report were suggestive of calculated attempts to undermine the function and activities of an organization dedicated to a noble and humanitarian mission, in violation of the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations, the Fourth Geneva Convention, and the Comay-Michelmore bilateral agreement of 1967 between the Agency and the Government of Israel. Bangladesh reiterated its call for Israel to guarantee unrestricted movement for the Agency's personnel, and refrain from interfering in its activities so that it could fulfil its responsibilities.

42. Bangladesh praised the work of UNRWA and recognized that it had improved coordination of its emergency activities on the ground and its close links with the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The Agency had extended microfinance and microcredit projects into its zones in Lebanon and Syria following their successful introduction in Gaza and the West Bank; and Bangladesh was willing to share his experiences in that domain with its Palestinian brothers.

43. The survival of the refugees in the occupied Palestinian territories depended crucially on UNRWA continuing to receive support; but Bangladesh was worried that the Agency's financial situation had worsened as the crisis in the Middle East had become deeper. Donor support had declined in 2003, since promised contributions only covered 40 per cent of the amount requested in the first half of the year. Bangladesh asked the international community to increase its contributions to the UNRWA budget at this critical time, because the Palestinians were victims of the worst tragedy that humanity had experienced, and all countries had a moral responsibility to support their cause.

44. Reform and revival were essential, so Bangladesh welcomed the Agency's initiatives to improve its management and its programmes, and encouraged it to persevere with reform to become better equipped to fulfil its mandate. Lastly, Bangladesh wished to express its deepest condolences to the families of UNRWA staff who had given their lives to improve those of the people for whom they were responsible.

45. **Mr. Maalouf** (United States) said that, by its substantial financial contribution to UNRWA, the United States had shown that it had not ceased to support humanitarian relief initiatives on behalf of the Palestinian refugees. In 2002, the United States had contributed US$88 million to the ordinary budget and US$31 million to the emergency appeal. United States, as the principal individual contributor, supported the Agency's mandate and believed that its programme represented a force for stability in the region. Nonetheless, it urgently needed greater financial support, so the speaker encouraged other States to increase their contributions to enable the Agency to fully provide for the needs of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East.

46. As General Assembly resolutions were much more effective when they were adopted by consensus, the United States deeply regretted the failure to achieve broader consensus on resolutions relating to UNRWA in previous years. The United States wanted to support a resolution on the humanitarian assistance provided by UNRWA to the Palestinian refugees, but it had not voted in favour of several resolutions on that subject because it judged that they went beyond purely humanitarian aspects and were drafted in terms that could have repercussions on the peace negotiations in the region.

47. To revive the General Assembly and focus international attention on the financial needs of UNRWA and the assistance needs of the Palestinian refugees, the resolutions of the Fourth Committee needed to be streamlined. During the plenary debates of the General Assembly on reform of the United Nations, the United States had asked the Assembly to speed up the grouping of topics. Nonetheless, while

there were reasons for converting the issue of UNRWA into a triennial topic, the United States was in favour of the Fourth Committee's continuing to consider it annually, at least while the Agency remained in a precarious financial situation, or until a just solution had been found for the refugee problem.

48. The United States hoped that a consolidated resolution would be adopted by consensus, and it believed all parties stood to gain from its proposal — the international community, the United Nations and its reform process, and the Palestinian refugees. Lastly, the speaker reiterated that his Government wanted a two-state solution and remained willing to alleviate the prolonged suffering of the Palestinian refugees.

The meeting was suspended at 5 p.m. and resumed at 5.45 p.m.

49. **Mr. Spatafora** (Italy), speaking on behalf of the European Union; applicant countries Cyprus, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland and the Czech Republic; associated countries Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey; and Iceland which was a member country of the European Free Trade Association which belonged to the European Economic Space, paid tribute to the six UNRWA staff members who had lost their lives in 2003 while performing their duties, and expressed the sincere hope that the Middle East peace process would soon be resumed, in order to provide a fair, stable and equitable solution to the Palestinian refugee problem without delay, in the framework of a definitive agreement on permanent status in conformity with the relevant United Nations resolutions. The services provided by UNRWA had thus far been essential to guarantee a decent life to Palestinian refugees in the Middle East.

50. The European Union noted with concern the annual report of the Commissioner-General (A/58/13), which confirmed that refugees, the most vulnerable sector of the Palestinian population, were those that were suffering most from the serious deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank. It was specially concerned about undernutrition and the destruction of housing in the refugee camps, which affected women and children in particular. It was particularly worried about the latter, and the European Union urged the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority to do everything possible to provide them with special protection and to guarantee full respect for their rights.

51. The European Union reiterated its opposition to the construction of the Israeli separation barrier in its current form, not only because it represented a violation of international law and endangered the search for a political solution to the conflict, but also because of the dramatic humanitarian consequences it implied for the Palestinian population. The deterioration of the situation on the ground had made it much harder to provide humanitarian assistance and essential services. The European Union once again urged the Israeli Government to allow full, secure and unfettered access to property and international and humanitarian personnel, as demanded by the roadmap, and to respect the provisions and practices of international humanitarian law.

52. The European Union was the main contributor to UNRWA funding, and it stood ready to help it address its growing needs. It urged the Israeli Government to refrain from adopting any measure that would aggravate the already difficult economic and humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people, and to adopt the measures called for in the roadmap, to improve their security and their economic and humanitarian situation, without delay. In 2002, the European Union had contributed over €160 million, and it expected to increase its assistance to the Palestinian refugees throughout the region. It should be noted that the European Commission had provided additional resources for humanitarian assistance, while at the same time maintaining its level of funding for ongoing development programmes.

53. The funding deficit in the emergency appeals was specially worrying, because it threatened to further reduce the provision of assistance at a time when needs were ever greater. In that regard, the European Union supported the Commissioner-General's initiatives to expand the donor community, particularly through increased contributions from Persian Gulf States and other Arab and Islamic countries, and from Islamic financial institutions. It believed alternative funding mechanisms should also be studied.

54. The European Union welcomed the transfer to the Palestinian Authority of VAT and other taxes withheld by Israel, which made it possible to return the amounts owed to UNRWA; and it urged Israel to transfer port duties and all other taxes relating to storage, demurrage and transit, levied on goods destined for the Agency.

55. While acknowledging the central role of UNRWA in the refugee problem, the European Union wanted to highlight the importance of cooperation between the Palestinian Authority, the donor community and the United Nations system in providing assistance to the Palestinian refugees, to achieve a single and consistent approach from the international community at large in dealing with the economic and humanitarian crisis, and to tackle the problems of macroeconomic stabilization, social assistance, the provision of support and rehabilitation. As there were resource constraints, the European Union trusted that programme overlaps would be avoided, in order to respond better to the growing humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people. Lastly, the European Union expressed its full support for the statements made by the United States and Palestine regarding the streamlining of the resolution on the Agency.

56. **Mr. Fallouh** (Syrian Arab Republic) stated that, after more than half a century in which the Middle East had been immersed in the current catastrophe, Syria did not see the slightest hope that the tragedy of the Palestinian people was about to end. Quite the contrary, the occupying power had intensified its vicious terrorist campaign, and was attacking innocent Palestinian civilians. That policy had resulted in a deterioration of health conditions, an increase in poverty and unemployment, and the displacement of thousands of people whose homes had been destroyed.

57. The UNRWA report described the obstacles and constraints faced by the Agency in fulfilling its task, as a result of the policy of confinement and other brutal policies imposed by Israel, which not only had attacked personnel providing humanitarian assistance, but had even assassinated six members of UNRWA. That clearly revealed the terrorist nature of Israel's criminal policies, and constituted a serious violation of the provisions of international law, the Charter of the United Nations, the Fourth Geneva Convention and the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations.

58. Palestinian refugees in Syria were treated equally with Syrian citizens, and, despite the enormous financial burden that that implied, all possible assistance was being given to UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees to enable them to lead a decent life until they could return to their homes. As noted in the Commissioner-General's report, the Syrian Government had allocated US$94 million to that task in 2003 alone. The report also mentioned the financial crisis being faced by UNRWA, and in that regard, Syria encouraged donors to increase their contributions to the Agency's budget.

59. The whole international community had a responsibility in relation to the Palestinian refugees, and Syria considered that UNRWA should continue providing services until the situation had been resolved. Syria opposed cutbacks in UNRWA services in any of its fields of operation, and it underlined the importance of its continuing to implement its programmes, including assistance in kind. The Agency should not allow the crisis it was facing to aggravate the financial situation of the Palestinian refugees and the countries that hosted them. The Syrian Arab Republic hoped the Agency would be able to continue its activities in its five current zones of operation, without any discrimination.

60. Sidestepping the gravity of the crisis created by the Palestinian refugee problem throughout the region would hinder the search for a lasting settlement and constitute a violation of international law. Syria considered that the situation created by Israel through its provocations and attacks, which had caused 2,600 Palestinian victims since September 2000, was the result of its vicious policies and clearly showed it was unwilling to achieve a fair and general peace in the region or to recognize the rights of the Palestinian people. Those rights should be based on recognition of the legitimacy and rights of all people, including the right of refugees to return to their land, which the General Assembly had been reaffirming since 1948.

The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.